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### **Book review: A Perfect Fit: The Garment Industry and American Jewry 1860-1960 (Lubbock:Texas Tech University Press, 2012)**

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*A Perfect Fit: The Garment Industry and American Jewry, 1860-1960*, ed. by Gabriel M. Goldstein and Elizabeth E. Greenberg (Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 2012). 272 pp., 152 illus., colour, black and white. £42.50/\$49.95. ISBN 10: 0896727351; ISBN-13: 978-0-89672-735-9.

This handsomely produced hardback is the follow-up publication initiated by an exhibition *A Perfect Fit: The Garment Industry and American Jewry, 1860-1960*, which ran for a few months from December 2005 to April 2006 at Yeshiva University Museum, New York City. The book is published as part of the Costume Society of America Series.

This is a multi-authored book of essays linked by the history of Jewish immigrants who became clothing entrepreneurs or workers in America's expanding ready-to-wear garment industry and by the more general historical development of that industry. Over its thirteen chapters, the book is successful in showing the heavy investment of Jewish immigrants' energies in clothing manufacture, whether as successful businessmen or as sweated labour. The essays, of course, have differing focus but, taken together, they provide a series of snapshots, some overlapping, some high definition of a particular detail, which builds to a picture of the Jewish immigrants' engagement with the garment industry over a century, from its origins in men's ready-to-wear to the rapid growth of women's readymades in the late nineteenth century, from the forging of a particularly American clothing identity in the 1940s (and the designers who contributed to it) to the industry's manufacturing decline in the 1970s. The book is well illustrated throughout, with a section devoted to photographs of the original exhibition. The upbeat, punning title of both exhibition and book, *A Perfect Fit*, may appeal to some, but while there is no doubting the success of many businesses – one of the exhibition sponsors was Levi Strauss Co. – there is also a darker side to the expression, since the early ready-to-wear garment industry offered to many migrants the sole point of entry to the labour market, one with notoriously poor wages and poor working conditions. *The Song*

*of the Shirt* was never far from my mind when reading sections of this book, especially Michael Zakim's chapter on the birth of the clothing industry in America. Elsewhere, Jewish garment-makers appear hauntingly in the photos of sweatshop rooms and as statistics in the tables of employees. One of the New York garment industry's lowest points was the tragedy of the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire of 1911, when 146 young women jumped to their deaths. (The recent garment industry tragedy in Bangladesh, April 2013, reminds us that these conditions have not gone away, simply migrated to other countries.)

The first Jewish migrants were from Western Europe, German Jews who had a knowledge of dealing in second-hand or new clothing in Germany, becoming peddlers before progressing to wholesale and manufacture. They would go on to dominate the men's wear and growing women's wear industries in the 1860s and 1870s. The book is good at showing how the Civil War accelerated and helped establish the men's ready to wear industry through the creation of standard sizing for uniform manufacture. The later wave of Jewish migration was from Eastern Europe. But while European Jewish migrants' contribution to the industry is clear in the book, we are much less aware of the other migrant groups, such as the Italians who by the 1920s were the largest single ethnic group in the New York needle trades – yet there is no sense of this in the book.

The book throws up instances where the Jewish entrepreneurs of the ready-to-wear industry were at odds with their workforce, many of whom were also Jewish, resisting their unionisation. Not surprisingly, there were many Jewish union leaders in the garment industry, working to gain fair wages and working conditions for their co-workers. This conflict of interest is rather skirted over, because while the book is keen to stress the co-religionists' links in a positive way through shared traditions and language, it is less keen to examine the sharp end of labour relations.

The book throws up fascinating information throughout: Sam Goldwyn worked in the glove-making business before moving into film-making. He used this knowledge of the garment industry when making his first feature film. D W Griffiths made a film *The Song of the Shirt* (1908) a silent showing the hard life of a seamstress, in this case one making shirtwaists.

Essays by William Toll and by Michelle Tolini Finamore show how the movie industry, by migrating from New York to Hollywood, influenced clothing production in LA and helped forge American dress identity. The book brings home the Jewish connection again – Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Fox; the studio system had a close relationship with the fashion industry and the cinema screen replaced the fashion magazine as the authority on the latest styles.

The book ends with the 1960s and notes the decline of the homeland manufacturing base in the 1970s. Despite that, the Jewish connection with the garment industry was to continue with the emergence of designers who, even as the US manufacturing base was losing ground to Asia, achieved enormous global success – Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein, Donna Karan (although they do not feature in this book). However you look at it, the Jewish contribution to the garment industry and American clothing identity has been hugely significant and this book charts some of that connection.

DAVID WILCOX